

Writing History: Examining the Relationship Between Research and Historical Fiction

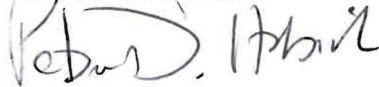
An Honors Thesis (Eng 444)

by

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A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Robert Habich", written over the printed name.

**Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana**

December 2012

Expected Date of Graduation

December 2012

Undergrad
Thesis
LD
2489
.Z4
2012
.M39

Abstract

Historical fiction requires more work than traditional, literary fiction. Historical accuracy must be the main focus, after telling a good story. To be sure of a piece's accuracy, significant research needs to be done before any of a story can be written. The relationship between research and historical fiction is significant to a better understanding of the creative process. To this end, I research immigration in the Gilded Age, and use that research to write a fictional short story.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Robert Habich for advising me on this project. His guidance helped me find my way when I was struggling with my direction for this project.

I would like to thank Beth and David for always being there for me and for always believing in me.

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Author's Statement

When I started out on this project, I was looking for something that would be fairly simple to do. I truthfully started later than I should have. I already had a lot on my plate, curriculum-wise, so I didn't want to make my project extremely labor intensive. That's why I decided to write something for my thesis. I wanted to play to my strengths and do something that I knew I could do well. I didn't realize all that my project would end up entailing.

The concept behind my project is something that I've thought about a lot throughout my undergraduate years. I love genre fiction, but it's not often taught in the English department. For the most part, I've had to read what most English teachers call "literary fiction." That is a genre on its own, but it's also what's generally just known as fiction. That's what it's labeled in libraries and bookstores. When I think of genre pieces, I think of *Ender's Game* (Orson Scott Card, sci-fi), *Harry Potter* (J.K. Rowling, fantasy) and *Alex Cross* (James Patterson, thriller). Few books like these are ever taught.

It's not that any of these genres are thought of as lesser forms of writing. The greatest works of sci-fi are always incredible social commentaries, like *1984* (George Orwell) or *Dune* (Frank Herbert). Some have even made it into the traditional English literature canon: *War of the Worlds* (H.G. Wells), *Fahrenheit 451* (Ray Bradbury), *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (Jules Verne). Fantasy is also represented in the canon with greats like *The Lord of the Rings* (J.R.R. Tolkien) and *Peter Pan* (J.M. Barrie). But in my college years, the closest I've gotten to reading anything similar has been magical realism novels, like *A Wild Sheep Chase* (Haruki Murakami).

Students are often encouraged to pursue genre writing if that's what they enjoy. But I've always felt that genre writing is stylistically and creatively very different from how we are taught to write in the English department. I've never heard a professor say not to write genre. But I've

also never had a professor who has taught the skills needed to produce a good piece of genre fiction.

Because I read a lot of genre fiction, I have tried writing genre pieces. But they've never been received well. I haven't been criticized for writing in a genre or reading genre. Most professors have been trained in the canon and that's what they understand literature to be. They expect their students to turn in pieces that could also be considered literature.

I've found that I've developed a different idea of what literature is than what is normally taught in my classes. I believe that literature is any piece of good writing. (For me, "good writing" means that it's well written.) I believe that literature is something that is more than just a story. It has to have depth and meaning beyond the exact words. Many of my favorite genre novels fit this definition.

So as a supplement to my writing education, I decided to try writing a genre piece. But I wanted to do something that would let me develop several different writing skills. That's why I chose to try my hand at historical fiction. This decision made my project very dependent on two parts: research and a short story. This gave me the idea to look at the relationship between research and historical fiction. I really wanted to look at the process of doing research and then developing a story based on that research.

The first step of the project was to choose a topic. I wanted a topic that I didn't know a whole lot about. I really wanted to have to do some serious research. I also wanted to choose something that I would be able to find a good deal of information on. I've never had to do much historical research, being a Creative Writing major. Historical research is very different from doing literary research. Where writing literary criticism allows for a level of subjectivity, historical writing has specific facts that must be adhered to. There is a smaller margin of error. If

facts are not right, the research is of no use. You can't really disagree with the facts of history like you can disagree with someone's interpretation of a poem. It was going to be a new experience for me. Another big concern when choosing my topic was who I would ask to be my advisor. Since I've been taking a class on Gilded Age literature, I thought that the Gilded Age would be a good time period to focus on and would give me access to someone who knows the time period well and could really be of help.

From there, things were fairly simple to get started. I didn't know much about the Gilded Age at the start of this project. So based off of conversations in class, I chose the more specific topic of immigration. To me, that seemed to be a fairly defining characteristic of the Gilded Age. Plus it lends itself well to historical fiction. Immigrants had to deal with a lot to come to this country, and to survive once they got here. I also felt a personal pull to try to understand the immigrant experience. My great-grandmother immigrated to America around 1929 (so after the Gilded Age) from Yugoslavia. I didn't know her too well, and she died before I was old enough to truly appreciate what she could tell me about her life. So I wanted to understand a little better what she would have gone through.

I knew I needed to narrow my topic down. Immigration is a big subject, even when confined to about forty years. I narrowed it to immigration of Europeans. I started fairly broad. I wanted to see what immigrants went through as a whole before I focused on any specific ethnic group. Just the general statistics of Gilded Age immigration was fascinating. But I couldn't write a short story about all the immigrants of the Gilded Age. There was just too much information.

I tightened my focus even more. Since the majority of immigrants ended up in cities, I decided to set my story in an urban environment. I found plenty of information on the living and working conditions of immigrants living in cities. Some of it I already knew. I understood how

poor the tenement buildings were. I knew that most immigrants worked low-wage, menial jobs. I knew that they were very discriminated against. What I didn't realize was those assumptions were only true of some immigrant groups, specifically Irish immigrants. I discovered very quickly that each immigrant group differed from the others in the way they reacted to the American culture and in the way the American people reacted to them.

I needed to pick a specific immigrant group if I was going to make the conflict in my story realistic. I found that there were two major shifts in Gilded Age immigration. The first part of the Gilded Age, Germans and the Irish dominated the immigration statistics. They were the top two immigrant groups until around 1890. After that, eastern and southern Europeans took over. I chose to stick with the western European immigrants because my family is German and Norwegian, groups of which came in large numbers during the early Gilded Age. In fact, my relatives on both sides of my family came to America during the late Gilded Age. We still have my great-great-grandmother's trunk that she shipped to America from Norway in 1882.

It was very eye-opening for me to be doing this project. I really did not know much about what my relatives went through when they came here. I'd never given it much thought. I never thought that they would have faced some of the challenges that they did. I'd always assumed that the immigrants that were discriminated against were the Irish. I meet so many people who say they're of German descent that I've never really thought about the fact that there weren't that many Germans in America at one point in time. Because of that, I've never considered how different from the American population the German people were.

That's when I decided that my story had to be about German immigrants. I needed to know more about my heritage. I wanted a better understanding of who my ancestors were. Of

course, I didn't do any research on my actual family. I wanted my piece to focus on the broad issues facing German immigrants of the time, not just what my family went through.

Once the research was done, I had more decisions to make. I couldn't put every issue facing German immigrants in my story. There is way too much to put it all in a short story. So I had to pick one specific issue and bring in small elements of others. There had to be one defining problem that would cause the conflict in the plot.

One of the most important things I found in German assimilation is that they held on tight to the German language. That was their major point of pride. So I made that the major point of conflict in my short story. But this brought in a major issue in writing my story. First generation immigrants largely spoke exclusively in German. They often sent their children to schools that taught in German. So I really wanted some of my characters to speak only in German. I was very concerned that doing that would confuse people. I was worried that the point of the story would get lost because parts of it would be unreadable for many people. For a while I toyed with the idea of putting all the translations in italics, but I felt that would take away too much from the story. I did use italics for translations at one point. I needed to because there was no way to use context clues to understand what was being said. Mostly I tried to rely on context clues to bring across the meaning of what was said in German. I did try to use as little as possible so potential readers wouldn't be put off.

I also brought in other elements of the German culture that affected their ability to assimilate into American society. I set the story in an urban ghetto-type location. Similar to places like Little Italy and Chinatown, many large cities had what was called Kleindeutschland, or Little Germany. Setting it there brings in the idea of the self-imposed isolation of the immigrants. This was common among all immigrant groups.

I also briefly touch on the traditional German biergarten. I felt this was important to bring in because my research showed that the activities Germans participated in on Sundays really set them apart from the native American population. I also briefly look at the ideas of poverty, women in the workforce and child labor. But these are not explored in depth and are essentially used to add to the historicity of the piece.

I had no idea at the start of this project what exactly I was undertaking. I had expected to write a simple research paper and an easy short story based on the research. But it ended up requiring so much more. A lot of what I went through probably doesn't show in the paper or the short story. I kept myself out of both pieces. But it wasn't easy.

While I was researching, I kept coming across things that I found fascinating. I have always been interested in history and especially how other people have lived. I became very absorbed in my research. But I did have to admit eventually that most of what I was reading about really didn't have anything to do with what I wanted to write about. I had to force myself to focus on the task at hand. There were often pieces of research that I found that I thought would be interesting to include in my paper. But when it came time to write the paper, I found there was no natural way to fit the pieces in. They were extraneous and unnecessary. I like to be able to tell absolutely everything I know about a subject. But if I had put in everything I learned about immigration, my paper would have ended up being a book, and truthfully, I probably wouldn't be finished with it.

My initial plan for writing my thesis had been to write the short story while writing the research paper. I thought that might make it easier for me to write the best pieces I could. Plus, I wouldn't get bored in the middle of the thesis writing process. But I quickly found out that wouldn't work. I had to do all of my research before starting on my story. I couldn't truly

understand what my story needed to say without understanding all the background of the story. I needed the research first.

This is a very different idea for me. Whenever I've needed research before for a piece of fiction, I've always done the research as it became necessary. I do it as I go along. Historical fiction doesn't work like that. It was a big realization for me. I never got anything like that out of any of my creative writing classes. So for just that, I feel that my thesis has greatly added to my education.

From doing this project, I've learned about so much. I've learned how to better do research, especially in a historical context. I've learned how to write based off of research. I've learned that sometimes research needs to come first to be able to understand the story. I've also learned about immigration and the Gilded Age. I've learned about what my family must have gone through when they immigrated to America. But most importantly, I've learned a lot about myself, as a student, a writer and a person. I can only hope that some of what I learned comes through my project.

Defining an Age: Immigration in the Gilded Age

Every period in American history has its own defining characteristics. One of the characteristics of the Gilded Age was the large scale immigration from Europe. Millions sought to escape the problems arising in Europe, seeing America as the way to do it. This essay will look at the facts of Gilded Age immigration, the reasons behind the mass immigration, how the immigrants adjusted to life in America, specifically looking at German immigrants as an example, and how the American population reacted to the new comers.

Historians encounter many problems when discussing the numbers of immigrants the reasons for their coming to America. It's difficult to know exactly how many immigrants came to America during the Gilded Age for a variety of reasons. And the reasons for these peoples' immigration are as varied as the places they came from. What is certain is that these immigrants came in unprecedented numbers and began to change the face of America.

The biggest problem one finds when researching immigration in the Gilded Age is that the Gilded Age is not strictly defined. Most agree that the period lasted from 1865-1900. But other counts begin as late as 1876 and end as late as World War I, while others end in 1895. For the terms of this paper, the Gilded Age is defined in the more accepted period of 1865-1900. With this definition, the number of immigrants to the United States was upwards of fourteen million (Daniels, "Coming to America" 124). This number isn't all-inclusive. Many immigrants, especially Chinese immigrants, were often not counted (Edwards 48).

The other major difficulty in understanding the immigrants of the Gilded Age lies with the government's mislabeling of ethnicities. Minority ethnicities were often labeled as the more populous ethnicities. Serbs, Slovenes, Croatians, Czech and others were generally labeled as Germans, Austrians or Hungarians. Poles were not counted separately until 1918. Jews were only

classified by place of birth. Their numbers from Russia, Austria and Romania can only be estimated (Dinnerstein, Nichols, Reimers 130-131). On top of this misrepresentation, there was also illegal immigration. While their numbers were not significant enough to affect statistics, there were a large number of Chinese that were brought to America illegally (Daniels, "Coming to America" 123).

Every year during the Gilded Age, the number of immigrants to America increased. But the native-born American population was also growing. Because of this, the percentage of immigrants as part of the total population did not fluctuate much during this period. The 1860 census reported foreign-born as being 13.2 percent of the population. This number remained steady until 1920, with censuses in between reporting percentages between 13.2 and 14.7 (Daniels, "Change or Continuity" 21).

In the early part of the Gilded Age, these immigrants came mainly from northern and western Europe. Germans and Irish made up the largest groups of immigrants. German numbers peaked between 1881 and 1890, with 1,452,970 immigrants. The Irish peaked in the same decade with 655,540 (Dinnerstein, Reimers 19). After 1890, the tide changed, and America saw more southern and eastern Europeans entering her borders (Boardman 102). It's unknown which ethnicities came in the largest numbers, because, as stated before, many were mislabeled by immigration authorities.

As for why these immigrants came, there are several universal reasons. Probably the most important reason they came was economics. But even this seemingly simple idea is a set of extremely complicated circumstances that led to the large numbers of European immigrants. Just like the United States, Europe was going through a profound amount of change during this time period. Its population was growing at a faster rate than agriculture or industry could support it.

Revolutions in agriculture and industry also led many people to move to follow jobs. Many had to leave their ancestral homes in the country to find work in the cities. And when they couldn't find work in the city, they followed the rumors of jobs across the Atlantic (Dinnerstein, Reimers 20). Many were lured by glamorous descriptions of working on railroads. They were also charmed by the large amount of cheap land available due to the Homestead Act, and land being sold at a discount by railroads and colleges trying to finance their schools (Boardman 85).

There were also other reasons immigrants came. These other reasons included religious persecution, political upheavals and social degradation (Dinnerstein, Reimers 20). Then there were also reasons dependent on the different ethnicities. For example, the Irish began coming in large numbers in the late 1840s because of the great potato famine (21). The Germans came because of crop failures, high rents, high prices and industrial revolution (22). Scandinavian immigrants were often escaping religious persecution by the state (24).

These reasons all constitute what is often called "push factors." These are reasons in an immigrant's homeland that "push" them towards immigration. There were also "pull factors," reasons that the United States "pulled" immigrants in. Largely, these had to do with immigrants believing they could make a better life in America (Daniels, "Change or Continuity" 22). It appeared to have plenty of jobs, land and freedom, which Europe seemed to be lacking (Dinnerstein, Reimers 24-25). Together these two types of factors constituted the reasons for the large numbers of immigrants to come to America during the Gilded Age.

When these immigrants arrived, they had many decisions to make. Their first, and possibly, most important decision was where to live. Many patterns emerge in the settlement of immigrants in the Gilded Age.

In Europe, there was a shift of the population from rural living to the cities. This shift continued when immigrants came to America. Immigrants were more likely to settle in larger cities during the Gilded Age (Daniels, “Change or Continuity” 22). Most ended up in large cities, first on the east coast, and then farther inland. They tended to stay wherever their voyage from Europe ended, like Boston, Chicago and New York (Handlin 145). And for the most part, the immigrants stayed in the North and West. Few went into the southern states (Daniels, “Change or Continuity” 22).

Patterns also emerged among the different ethnicities. For example, Irish immigrants often settled in the northeastern states. In 1860, 20 percent of the Irish immigrant population lived in Boston, and another 48 percent lived in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The Germans were usually found in what was once known as the Northwest Territory – Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin. About 47 percent of the German immigrant population lived in these states in 1860 (Archdeacon 47). The Russians and Italians favored the Mid-Atlantic States, while the Scandinavians tended toward the west north central states (Daniels, “Change or Continuity”).

Ethnic enclaves began to spring up in the larger cities. The most well-known of these enclaves were the Chinatowns. But other groups had their own sections of cities. For example, the Germans had Kleindeutschland (Little Germany) and the Italians had Little Italy (Daniels, “Change or Continuity 23). Immigrants settled in these ethnic enclaves because they were familiar. They turned to those that had come before them for assistance. Many immigrants came to America knowing little to no English. They also had no jobs, no living arrangements and no definite idea of what to make of their new home. This is where groups such as the Irish Emigrant Society of New York and Die Deutsche Gesellschaft (The German Company) came in. They

provided food, temporary shelter, travel assistance and job information to newly arrived immigrants (Dinnerstein, Nichols, Reimers 113).

Where the immigrants settled also depended, in large part, on how much money they had. The Irish stayed in the large eastern cities because they didn't have the funds to move farther west (Archdeacon 47). Immigration was often a last resort. The immigrants had very little when they came to America because most of what they had would have gone to paying for their crossing. Hence, when they arrived in American cities, they often ended up in poor tenement buildings that were crowded, dirty and sometimes unstable, but were also cheap (Handlin 147). The Irish also didn't have the farming skills that would make it reasonable to move west to buy land and farm. The Germans, on the other hand, had both the skills and the necessary funds to be able to make it farming in the Midwest (Archdeacon 47). Between 1860 and 1890, approximately three-fifths of German immigrants lived in rural communities (Daniels, *Coming to America* 149).

This tendency to settle in groups affected the immigrants' desire to assimilate into American culture. There is a lack of consensus on how successful American assimilation was, but most agree that within a few generations, the immigrants' descendants were wholly immersed in the American culture. But many strongly opposed the loss of their own culture.

According to Thomas J. Archdeacon, there were four main approaches to assimilation that are exemplified by four different ethnic groups. First, British immigrants immediately and completely, for the most part, assimilated to American culture. The Scandinavians also tended towards assimilation, but they were also able to keep many of their traditions. They already shared much in common with Americans, so they weren't discriminated against for practicing their own customs, as other groups were (111).

The third reaction was within the German population. Because of their large numbers, the Germans tended towards resistance to assimilation. Their main source of resistance was in their attempt to keep speaking German (Archdeacon 111). The German enclaves often set up public and parochial schools that taught in German. Since this was clear resistance to their assimilation, native Americans responded harshly. In 1890, Wisconsin passed the Bennett law and Illinois passed the Edwards law. Both laws required attendance at schools where instruction was given in English. The laws were eventually repealed, but the damage was already done (Coppa, Curran 55). In about one generation, the German language had gone out of regular use in the German community. After they let go of their language, the Germans' situation became very similar to that of the Scandinavians. They were able to hold onto some of their other customs and traditions without persecution from native Americans (Archdeacon 111).

But by the 1890, many more radical German spokesmen began to criticize the level of assimilation the German-American population was doing. German immigration was dropping off and the older generations were passing away (Bergquist 18). More and more were also turning to English because it was too difficult to communicate with the many dialects they spoke (18). Urban communities worked hard to maintain their unity. They started annual "German days" in an attempt to glorify the German culture (21). German churches were the last to conform to American ideals. Services were conducted in German all the way till the end of the Gilded Age (22).

The final reaction was that of the Irish. The Irish managed to hold onto their cultural identity longer than the other groups because of their attachment to Catholicism (Archdeacon 111). Like the Germans, the Irish set up their own school system. They were attempting to shield themselves from anti-Catholic hostility that pervaded the American mind at the time (Copa,

Curran 101). But at the same time, the Irish were also attempting to Anglicize the Catholic Church, so it would be better accepted in America. They succeeded up to a point. But their success forced Catholic immigrants from other countries, and Catholic Americans, to go through a double process of acculturation to accommodate the Irish (Archdeacon 111).

There were other efforts to avoid complete assimilation. The German language was the first and foremost point of pride. This was held onto with parochial schools and community newspapers. Immigrants also tenaciously held onto their traditional holidays (Dinnerstein, Nichols, Reimers 164). Some of these holiday traditions managed to seep their way into the American culture, like the German Christmas tree. Beyond that, there were thousands of specialized associations, societies, guilds and other such organizations that attempted to bridge the gap between tradition and assimilation (Dinnerstein, Nichols, Reimers 164).

Home life was extremely important to the issue of assimilation. Among the Germans, women were expected to keep the German culture alive. It was expected that they would teach their children their German traditions (Dinnerstein, Reimers 45). German was usually the language spoken in the home. But while parents worked to keep their traditions alive, children were more likely to succumb to the pressures of assimilation (Daniels, "Change or Continuity" 23). This was due in large part to their education in the public school system.

But no matter how much the immigrants assimilated, the native American population still saw them as outsiders. The reasons behind American intolerance varied. Some stemmed out of religion. In the mainly Protestant America, the Irish were often discriminated against for being Catholic. They feared having a strong Catholic community in America would lead to the U.S. government being controlled by the Catholic Church in Rome (Archdeacon 75). But religious discrimination went further. Many Americans identified as Protestant while not being consistent

churchgoers. Their identification, though, led to many traditional practices, such as keeping the Sabbath day for a day of relaxation. On the other hand, the Germans celebrated the Sabbath with picnics and beer gardens. Americans felt that the Germans were desecrating the day of the Lord, and discriminated against them because of it (Coppa, Curan 55).

Another source of discrimination came out of the economics of the time. Most immigrants were poor. This gave rise to the fear that America would be overwhelmed by poor people. Also, because they were poor, immigrants were willing to take any job they could get at any wage that was offered. Americans believed that this would depress wages, take jobs away from Americans and lower their standard of living (Dinnerstein, Reimers 41).

The third part of American discrimination was not something that immigrants could completely control. As stated before, most immigrants ended up in urban areas. They were poor and lived in cramped, unsanitary conditions. Out of this grew disease and crime. Not only were the urban centers the immigrants lived in lacking in sanitation, the immigrants were also unfamiliar with the hygiene required by urban living. Thus they were prime carriers of disease (Archdeacon 72). Crime was rampant in the inner cities. The increase in the immigrant population was often seen as the reason for it. Many Americans, especially law enforcement, saw immigrants as trouble makers. Many were arrested for only minor offenses (72).

Immigration has always played a major role in the development of the United States. The Gilded Age was no exception. It saw a spike in immigration from Europe that changed America forever. These immigrants worked to keep parts of their culture, but ultimately fell to the American culture, either through pressure to assimilate or the passing away of the immigrant generations. With this, immigration remains at the forefront of Gilded Age discussion.

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Escaping Kleindeutschland

The city streets grew darker as Cora trudged home from work. Her pace grew increasingly slower as she neared the tenement building her family lived in. Around her, haggard men shuffled into bars and dirt-stained children played in the gutters. The alley echoed with the sounds of dozens of families preparing for the evening.

Cora slipped her hands into the pockets of her apron, trying to keep them warm. The wind blew her blonde braid around her head to smack her in the face. She stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, and rubbed her eyes. They ached from straining to see the small stitches she had to make in the factory. She shivered, walked to the nearest door and went in.

The door open to a hall lined with a series of apartments and staircase that led to more. A cacophony of voices passed unhindered through the paper thin walls. Some whispered in English, and were mostly covered by boisterous shouts and angry conversations spoken in German. Cora leaned against the door blocking her escape from the thought-addling amount of noise. A door upstairs opened and slammed shut again, preceding the sounds of feet stomping down the precarious wooden stairs.

As the footsteps came closer, Cora could hear mutterings of German expletives. She could tell it was her father's voice. She quickly pulled the door open, pretending she was just coming in. Father would not be pleased to see her loitering downstairs when there was work to be done for the family. She shut the door carefully just as her father came into view.

"Cora," he boomed at her.

His voice echoed in the enclosed space. A few tenants shouted for her father to be quiet. He shouted right back at them, ignoring his daughter climbing the stairs towards him. Cora

watched the stairs, hoping to get past without comment. But her father grabbed her arm before she could slip past, and dragged her back down to the bottom of the stairs.

“Cora,” he said. “Wo bist du gewesen?”

“Work,” Cora said, not meeting his eyes.

His grip tightened on her arm. Cora squeezed her eyes shut, as tears welled up from the pain.

“Wo bist du gewesen?” he asked again, snarling.

“Arbeiten,” she answered.

“Sie sollten früher nach Hause gewesen. Nicht schon wieder zu spät sein.”

He let go of her, and stumbled out the door, headed for the nearest bar.

Cora leaned against the banister. *Why does it matter if I'm late*, she thought. *You have your precious little Elsa to push around.* She forced herself to climb the creaky stairs to home.

The family's tenement was located on the third floor. Cora hesitated before opening the door, listening to the German conversation emanating from the wood.

“Mutter, Otto took my ball,” nine-year-old Fritz yelled.

“It's my ball,” his twin, Otto, answered

“Elsa, will you please calm your sister down,” her mother said.

Their baby sister's cries slipped under the door, flooding the hallway. Cora steeled herself, and went inside.

The single room apartment she walked into was in a state of complete chaos. Otto and Fritz wrestled each other on the floor, the ball lying forgotten on their family's only mattress. Elsa, Cora's fifteen-year-old sister, walked up and down the narrow room, bouncing the baby Sara on her hip. Whenever the boys rolled too close to her, Elsa would yell, “Achten,” and the

boys would move back the other way. Her mother stood with her back to the ruckus, fixing dinner on their wood burning stove. An oil lantern hung from the ceiling, illuminating the place Cora was supposed to call home.

No one noticed Cora standing in the doorway, and she watched the scene for a moment. Then the shouts came from the down the hall.

“Ruhig sein.” *Be quiet.*

“Unterrichten diese Kinder ein paar Manieren.” *Teach those kids some manners.*

“Ein weiteres Mal und ich bekomme die Polizei.” *One more time and I get the police.*

Cora stormed into the room, leaving the door open. She yanked the two boys off the floor and shook them.

“Stop,” she yelled. “Can’t you two keep from fighting for five minutes?”

The boys looked at her in horror. Elsa kept her back turned to Cora. Cora froze holding the backs of her brothers’ shirts. She didn’t want to turn around. The silence coming from the stove scared her beyond what she thought was possible. The last time she had spoken English around her mother, she had ended up with bruises that took a month to fully heal. She slowly turned around.

Her mother stood with her arms crossed. Cora watched the fury building in her face.

“Mutter, tut mir leid,” Cora said

As she’d expected, her apology went unheard. She felt the world slow around her as her mother prepared to strike.

“Mutter, der Topf kocht,” Elsa said.

Cora had been saved. Instead of hitting her, her mother hurriedly went back to her cooking. The pot was boiling over, and she removed it from the heat.

Without looking at her, her mother said, “Bekommen die Schalen.”

She hadn't been forgiven, but Cora wasn't going to take any more chances. She scurried to the little cabinet where they kept their bowls, and pulled out five. She handed them to her mother, who dished out soup for each. Cora handed each full bowl to one of her siblings. Otto and Fritz each sat on crates by the wall. Elsa sat at their worn kitchen table, with baby Sara on her lap. She blew on a spoonful of soup, and fed it to Sara, who hiccupped and sniffed, her last tears still flowing down her chubby face.

Her mother filled up the fourth bowl, but instead of handing it to Cora, she put the lid on the pot of soup, and went to sit at the table. Standing next to the stove with her empty bowl, Cora was relieved that her punishment was only to go hungry for the evening. But that was only if her father wasn't told about her mistake.

The next morning, Cora got up before the rest of her family, and left the apartment as quietly as possible. She tore down the stairs, desperate to get away from the miserable little building.

Outside, the sun just peeked over the rooftops of the city skyline. Dew covered the pavement, making the ground slick to walk on. Cora let the light cool breeze blow across her face. She felt renewed and safe. Last night was behind her, and it was a new day.

Her first stop would be the bakery down the street. After going without supper, she was hungry. Her fingers fumbled in her apron pocket for the coins she had earned yesterday. Her mother had refused to speak to her for the rest of the night, and had forgotten to collect Cora's earnings.

Kleindeutschland stirred slowly from slumber as she walked to the bakery. A butcher boy from Dickenschildt's Metzgerei hurried past with some of the morning's deliveries. Bells chimed down the street at the Lutheran church. A few men stumbled home after a night of carousing. Cora dodged a particularly grumpy old man, who shot her a look of annoyance and muttered a German expletive under his breath. She ducked into the bakery, hoping to avoid any more confrontations.

At the counter, her friend Karolin positioned pastries to appear more appetizing. Cora's mouth watered at the sight, and she strode to the counter. Karolin beamed when she saw Cora.

"Cora," she said, in English. "I was hoping to see you today."

"Good thing I didn't have supper last night, then," Cora said.

A flash of concern flashed across Karolin's face, but was quickly replaced by excitement.

"I know someone who wants to meet you," she said.

"Karolin, please. Not again."

"This time will be different. I promise."

"That's what you've said the last three times," Cora said. She tapped her fist lightly on the counter. "You know my father won't let me marry. Who would pay for food while he's drinking away his earnings?"

Karolin pulled a pastry out of the display case and began wrapping it.

"You need to get away from him," she said. "This guy could take you away, if you just gave him a chance."

Cora avoided Karolin's eyes. She was right of course. The only way out was to get married. But could she do it without her family's consent? Would any man be willing to take her without a dowry? And would any man actually want her?

In Kleindeutschland, Cora was considered a bit of an anomaly. She may have been born in Germany, but she'd spent the past five years in America and she considered this her home. She loved the culture and people. She spoke English when she wasn't with her parents. She went to American theater and read books by American authors. She was even working on her papers to become a naturalized American citizen. Her parents likely would have disowned her had they known all this.

Her parents belonged to the more conservative section of German immigrants. They still saw Germany as their home, even though they had to know that they would never go back. They rarely left Kleindeutschland. Anyone speaking to them in English was ignored. If it was one of their children, they were punished.

But they still expected their children to be in American society. As the oldest, Cora worked at a hotel outside of Kleindeutschland as a maid. Elsa stayed home to help their mother with Sara and housework. Her two brothers went to public school. Most nights consisted of her parents raging against the requirement that the boys were taught in English. Her father often said that America was the land of freedom for everyone except the Germans. Cora disagreed, but never said so.

"He'll be at the biergarten tomorrow," Karolin continued. "Your vater wouldn't dare cause a scene there."

"Fine, I'll meet him," Cora said, knowing Karolin wouldn't take no for an answer.

Sundays in Kleindeutschland consisted of church in the mornings and biergärten in the evening. It was the big social event of the week. While most Americans were home relaxing with their families, the Germans were busy drinking and conversing loudly. It wasn't unusual for the

police to show up. Most of the time it was to tell them to be quiet. But every once in a while, they had to break up a fight. Many of Cora's non-German friends saw the biergärten as a pagan ritual that took away from what the Lord intended Sunday to be. A few went so far as to ask her to go to church with them in a thinly veiled attempt to show her the "error of her ways." The biergärten was one tradition Cora wasn't willing to give up.

This week, as soon as Cora arrived with her family, Karolin grabbed her arm and pulled her off to a far table. At the table sat a man in his mid-twenties. He was handsome, with dark brown hair and eyes. He watched the scene around him with obvious interest. Cora immediately knew that he had never been to a biergarten before. Cora stopped abruptly, and pulled Karolin close to her.

In English, she whispered, "He's not German, is he?"

Karolin's eyes pleaded with her, "Just talk to him. That's all I'm asking."

The smart thing to do would have been to walk away. If she went over there, she would have to talk in English. Doing so at home was shameful to her. Doing so in public was shameful to her family. Her father would never let it go. He would have to keep her away from the biergärten forever to try to restore their reputation. Most likely, he would marry her off at the first chance he got. But her public disgrace would make that difficult, and his hatred of her would increase. If she spoke to this young American, she would never escape. But would she lose her one opportunity to get out if she didn't? Cora steeled herself, knowing that this conversation could change her whole life.

The young man stood up when he saw them approaching. Karolin pushed Cora right up in front of him.

"Cora, this is Michael," she said. "Michael, Cora."

Michael held out his hand, “It’s nice to meet you, Cora. Karolin’s told me much about you.”

Feeling the judgmental eyes glancing their way, Cora’s face flushed. She glanced around to make sure her parents were occupied before answering him.

“It’s nice to meet you as well,” she said as quietly as possible.

Michael either ignored the glares people were shooting at them, or he didn’t realize that he might cause a fight.

“This is the first time I’ve been to one of these, um...what do you call them again?” he said.

Cora looked around for Karolin, but she had disappeared.

“Biergarten,” she answered.

“That’s it,” he said.

The people nearby were clearly agitated by the stranger in their midst. It was only a matter of time before someone said something.

“I must say it’s not what I expected,” Michael continued. “From what I’d heard, these were an excuse to get drunk in public. But it’s more like a social, isn’t it?”

Cora cringed at how loud Michael’s voice was, “Could you please not talk so loud?”

He looked at her confused. That’s when he noticed that the people nearby speaking quieter and throwing furtive glances their way.

“Did I do something?” he asked, moving closer to Cora so she could hear him speaking quieter.

A tap on her shoulder prevented Cora from answering. She turned around to see Elsa with baby Sara in her arms.

“Vater sucht dich,” she said. She nodded to Michael, “er gehen sollte.”

The reproach in her sister’s eyes pushed Cora closer to the edge. Elsa, the perfect child. She rarely left the apartment. Cora didn’t think she’d ever gone more than a block away from home. She always did everything right. Whenever Cora did something their parents considered too American, they told her to be more like Elsa.

“Er gehört nicht hierher,” Elsa said.

He belongs here more than any of the rest of us, Cora thought. Michael was an American, and this was their home. This wasn’t Germany. They couldn’t make it German, no matter how hard they tried. It was about time she told her father that.

As if she knew what Cora was thinking, Elsa shook her head, turning away. Sara giggled from Elsa’s hip and waved at Cora. She watched them go. What would happen if she did leave? Her income, combined with her mother’s, was barely enough to keep a roof over their heads and food in their stomachs. Would her father give up his beer money to provide for his family? More likely, Elsa would have to find a job. But where would baby Sara go while Elsa and their mother were working? Cora felt her resolve slipping away.

“What did she say?” Michael asked.

“You should probably go,” she said.

“Cora!”

Her father brutally grabbed the back of her dress and pulled her close to him. The stench of beer poured off of him, threatening to suffocate her. He couldn’t hit her with all the people around, but he wanted to make sure she knew that he was going to. He shook her till Cora could feel her brain rattling around in her skull. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Elsa watching. Michael moved to intervene, but was blocked by several of her father’s friends.

“Jetzt gehen,” her father spit in her ear. “Sie sind kein meine Tochter.”

She stumbled as he shoved her away from him. Michael got around the men and caught her before she fell into a table. She struggled to blink the tears out of her eyes. Seeing the drama was over, people went back to their socializing. A few watched her with pity. Her mother caught her eye, frowned and turned her back. Elsa followed her mother’s lead.

“What happened?” Michael asked.

A heavy sob wracked Cora’s body. She choked on the words. She knew she could never go home again. All of Kleindeutschland would shun her. She had nowhere to go. The panic clouded her brain, removing all thought. With those simple words, her father had disowned her. She drifted away from herself. She fell to her knees.

A pressure on her shoulders brought her back to reality. Michael was pulling her up off the ground. Karolin was next to him, saying something. Her pulse pounded in her ears. She let them pull her from the crowd

It was what she had wanted for so long. A part of her must have known that this was what would happen. It was why she’d done it. It had been the only way. One thought repeated over and over in her head as Michael and Karolin led her away:

I’m free.